

2018 WALK 7 Weston, Forster Country and Graveley

Throughout 2018, our walk each month will feature the corresponding site in our "Countryside Under Threat" calendar. Our aim is to highlight these sites and raise their profile in aid of local campaigns to prevent their inappropriate development.



Our July walk of just under 6¾ miles explores Green Belt countryside in North Hertfordshire District to the north of Stevenage. There is an optional detour into the Stevenage Borough Council area to see more of Forster Country, the open countryside between Graveley and the edge of Stevenage. Much of this area is proposed in the emerging North Hertfordshire and Stevenage Local Plans for a development of 1,700 houses. Agricultural land would be lost and

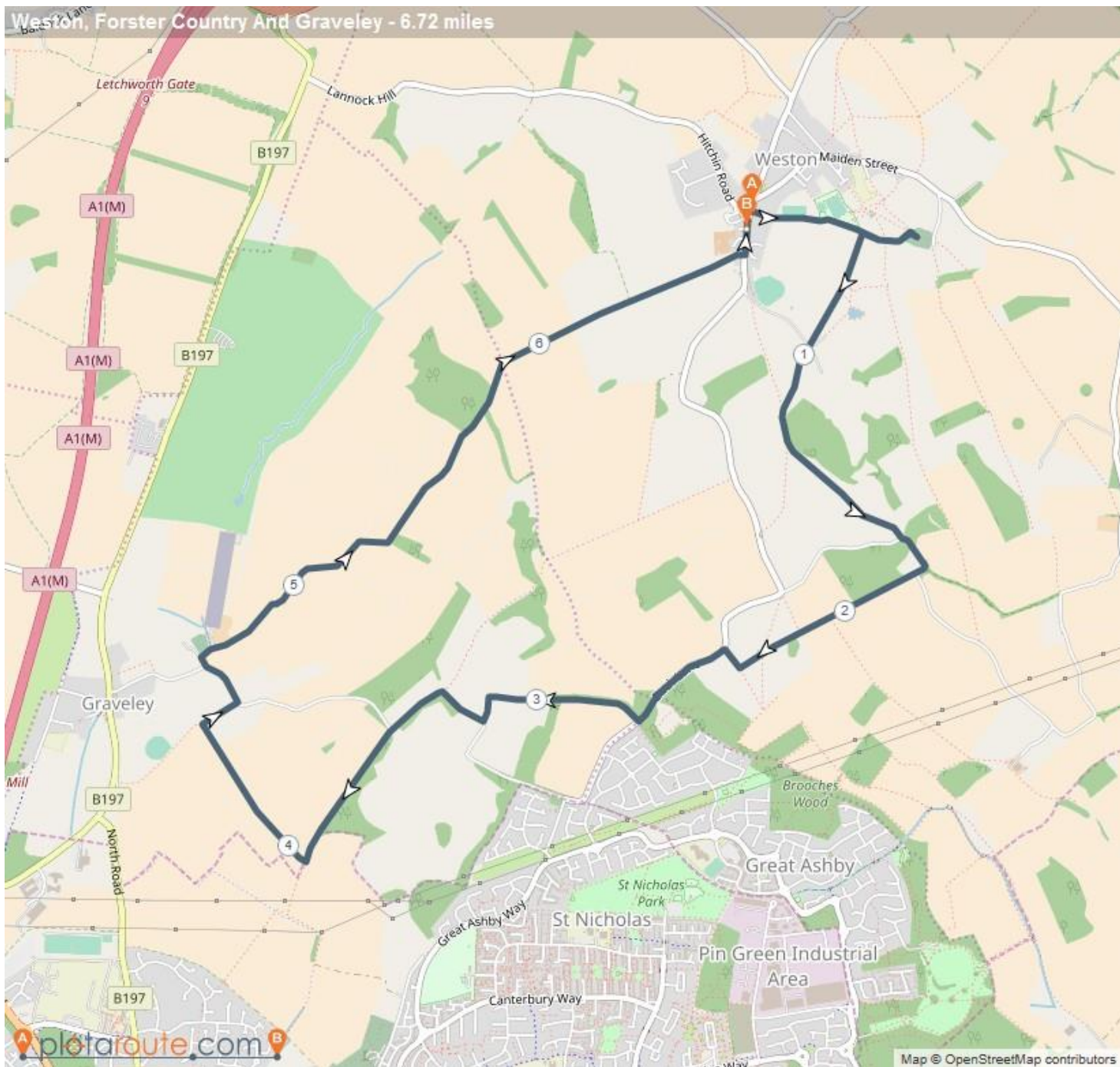
precious urban-fringe countryside, so important for health and well-being, would disappear.

The walk described starts and finishes in the village of Weston, runs along part of the Hertfordshire Way passing through the deserted mediaeval village of Chesfield, and also visits Graveley. It takes in varied countryside, with wide-ranging views in many places. Apart from the gentle climb out of Graveley the route is mainly level. A few short stretches of the walk run along country lanes. There are no stiles. Alternatively you could start the walk in Graveley, parking on the High Street, the B197, and walking down Church Lane towards the church.

There are pubs in Weston and Graveley.

Parking The walk starts and finishes at point A on the map, in Weston, about 2 miles due east of Junction 9 of the A1(M) and north of Stevenage. It is also close to Letchworth, Baldock and Hitchin. Park on the roadside near the Red Lion pub (see photo right), which is close to the small grassed triangle of land on the western side of the village, on Damask Green Road, SG4 7DE.





To begin the walk, take the public footpath which starts opposite the Red Lion pub and runs eastwards towards the church, signposted also to 'Halls Green 1½'. This path passes a rugby pitch and goes through a kissing gate (see photo right) to a second field with a children's playground, football pitch and wildflower meadow. Keep close to the hedge on the right and go through the gateway in the far right-hand corner. Keep straight ahead on this path with an archway of trees above, and go through the next gate into the churchyard.



If the church (Holy Trinity) is open you may like to explore the interior, with its intact four Norman arches of the crossing at the base of the tower, part of an early 12th century structure. The upper part of the tower and the brick chancel are Victorian. The nave beams rest on unusual carved heads, two of which are said to resemble King Henry IV and his Queen. Near the main gate to the churchyard is the 'grave' of the legendary giant Jack O'Legs.



To resume the walk retrace your steps, passing the bare trunk of the large pine tree beyond the west end of the church. Go through the wooden gate marked with the roundel way-marking the Hertfordshire Way, with its white arrow on a green background (see example right). (Do not take the metal gate out of the churchyard.) You will now be following the Herts Way as far as Graveley.



Follow the footpath to the **second** kissing gate on the left, then go straight across the field under the wires to the kissing gate on the far side on the edge of the wood (see photo right). Go straight on through the narrow end of the wood, then through the next kissing gate to emerge into Weston Park.



Follow the line of the path between the trees (see photo left). Go towards and through the wooden and metal kissing gate (see photo right), just after passing a Wellingtonia tree to the left.



Go straight across the drive - Park Lodge is a little way along the drive to your right. Go under the boughs of a large Horse Chestnut tree on the other side of the drive and through the next kissing gate into another part of the park. Bear slightly left and head for the decaying tree stump (see photo



left), then go alongside and slightly to the right of a row of young lime trees. Cross to the left of this row of trees to go through a kissing gate, then turn right along the drive (see photo above right).



Go through the metal field gate then turn left almost immediately to walk alongside the edge of the wood to the left (see photo left). At the next waymark post (see photo right) take the left-hand path going straight on, with the edge of the wood still to your left.



The edge of the wood turns away to the left: go straight ahead passing a very mature oak tree and head for the kissing gate in the hedge ahead (see photo right). Go across the next small field to the metal kissing gate ahead to reach a road.



At the roadside go straight on following the direction indicated by the Herts Way finger post (see photo right). Follow the road around the sharp right-hand bend. After a short distance the road turns sharp left: keep straight on here, leaving the road to follow the public footpath number 027 and another Herts Way finger post.



Follow the footpath with an arable field to the left and a wood to the right: beyond the end of the wood there is a hedge to the right and later pasture to the left. The route leads to Tilekiln Farm ahead (see photo right). Go through the kissing gate just before the farm buildings then keep straight ahead alongside a hedge to the right and a fence to the left (this might be a tight squeeze) to reach the gravel drive. Go straight on with the Bell Barn and a manège to the right. Turn right to continue to follow the drive, then turn left onto the road.



Follow the road for about 500 yards. Just past the section of road with woodland on both sides turn right onto the footpath signposted 'Public Footpath 10 Manor Farm 1/2'. Keep going straight on this footpath with a hedge on the left and a young plantation on the right enclosed by a wire fence (see photo right). Here you are close to the edge of Stevenage although the houses are well screened. Beyond the end of the plantation there are fields to the right.



Keep on the path until you emerge onto a road. This is the deserted village of Chesfield. Opposite, in a field and not accessible to the public, there are ruins of the church of St Etheldreda, once at the centre of the village. The church was built in the 14th century and last used in 1731. Today there are just farm buildings and a few houses here. There is a huge oak tree on the roadside verge (see photo right). Turn left here and follow the road to its junction with another road. Turn right and follow the road around a sharp bend to the left.



A little further on, where the road turns sharply to the right, go straight on, still following the Herts Way. You now have a wood to the left and a large arable field to the right. Ahead the Lister Hospital in Stevenage is very visible and beyond there are views across Stevenage to the south west and over Hitchin to the west, with the scarp of the Chiltern Hills beyond. Walk past the end of the wood to the left to reach a wide path running over the hill to the north west (see photo right).



You are now in Forster Country. The novelist E M Forster (1879 - 1970) spent 10 years of his childhood, from 1883, in the house called Rook's Nest (now Rook's Nest House) which is close to here. The house in his novel 'Howards End' was based on Rook's Nest, which had once been owned by a Howard family and known as 'Howards'. The Hilton of the novel, written between 1908 and 1910, is Stevenage. Forster said in a radio broadcast in 1946, at the time when Stevenage was designated as a new town, 'I was brought up.....in a district which I still think is the loveliest in England'.

In a letter to The Times in 1960 a group of literary figures, including W H Auden, John Betjeman, Sir Arthur Bryant, Graham Greene and Vita Sackville-West, used the description 'Forster Country' when deploring the threat to use the area for an expansion of built-up Stevenage. The letter expressed the hope that 200 acres around Rook's Nest could be preserved, 'because it is the Forster Country of Howards End'.

If you want to see more of Forster Country, keep going southwards towards the pylons, turning left through the gap in the hedge. You will now be walking in the last remaining farmed land in the Stevenage Borough area. Go under the electricity lines, turn left at the hedge and follow the path around the corner of the hedge, under the second set of wires. From here you have a view towards the spire of St Nicholas church, the church of old Stevenage which has Norman origins, while Rook's Nest is on the hill to the left.



To resume the circular walk, retrace your steps to the start of the wide path running over the hill towards the north-west and follow this. As you go over the hill the view gradually opens out, looking west across Hitchin to the Chiltern Hills beyond (see photo right), and south across Stevenage, although much of the built-up area is screened by trees. However, this will be very different if the development proposed for Forster Country goes ahead. Most of the land between the north-south footpath you have just walked along, the B197 road and the village of Graveley is included in the proposal area. The view you are enjoying as you head towards Graveley will be impeded by building.



The footpath begins to run downhill towards Graveley (see photo left).

At the T-junction of footpaths by the signpost (see photo right), turn **right**, continuing to follow the route of the Herts Way.



From the start of this section you have another view of the area proposed for development, which covers the field as far as the woodland on the horizon, down to the hedge in the middle distance (see photo right).

Follow the path to the road, then turn left and walk into the village. Take care on this short stretch of road which can get quite busy.



Unless you want to visit Graveley High Street and its pubs, turn right onto the short stretch of road leading to Graveley Church (see photo right). St Mary's is a Grade 1 listed building, dating from the 13th century, although elements of the structure are older. Immediately to the west of the church are the 17th century buildings of Graveley Hall Farm.



If you are starting this walk in Graveley, follow it from here.

With your back to the church, turn left and walk the short distance to where the Herts Way finger post points to the left. Here this walk leaves the Herts Way and goes straight on along the bridleway between hedges, beginning a gentle climb (see photo right).



This is Brooks Hill.



If you are walking in summer, look out for plants alongside the path like this bellflower (see photo left). You will soon begin to see far-reaching views back over Graveley to the Chiltern Hills in the distance (see photo right).



The bridleway runs all the way to Weston, a distance of about two miles, much of it along the hill top and brow, from where the views continue.

There is a last view of the area proposed for development (see photo right), which includes most of the land in view beyond the hedges and scattered trees in the middle distance, coming very close to Graveley.



Keep following the wide path, keeping to the left-hand route past the seat on the top of the hill. A little further on the route goes downhill a little and bends to the right, with views ahead over fields, hedges and woodland (see photo right).





The route then bends to the left, passing a small wood on the right. Ahead the route runs along the edge of the brow of the hill, with oak trees to the right, and later on both sides of the path (see photo left). There are further views to the right over fields and woods (see photo right).



The route runs to the right of another wood (How Wood), then beyond the wood there is a short section between fields. At the far end, by a tree at the end of a hedge, turn right at the waymark post (see photo left). There is now a broad path ahead running between fields, with Weston in the distance (see photo right).



Keep going straight ahead, going through this kissing gate (see photo left). In the last field you will see the gap in the hedge ahead (see photo right). Go through the gate into Rowan Close, then turn left at the road. You are now in Damask Green on the edge of Weston.



Continue along Damask Green Road for approximately 200 yards to return to the Red Lion pub and your parking place.

If you have enjoyed this walk, please consider supporting CPRE Hertfordshire in our efforts to protect and celebrate the Hertfordshire countryside for everyone to enjoy. Our website www.cpreherts.org.uk contains more information about our work and how you can donate and perhaps volunteer.

This route was last walked by CPRE in June 2018.

Note: all walkers do so at their own risk. Suitable footwear and clothing are recommended.

CPRE Hertfordshire is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, registered charity no. 1162419, address: 31a Church Street, Welwyn, AL6 9LW, tel: 01438 717587.

We are the county branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England.